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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR SA/INS, PM, PM/WRA
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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PGOV FAID KHDP CE LTTE

SUBJECT: U.S.-sponsored humanitarian demining training program for Sri Lankan military enters operational phase

Refs: (A) Colombo 1488
- (B) Colombo 1430
- (C) Colombo 1295, and previous

¶1. (U) This message is Sensitive but Unclassified --
Please handle accordingly.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: A major State Department-sponsored humanitarian demining training initiative has entered its operational phase. Run by the RONCO Corporation, the program is training the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) in humanitarian demining operations and will provide on-site technical support during mine clearance operations in the north/east. The program, which has consistently garnered positive press coverage, is a signal of strong U.S. support for Sri Lanka's peace and reconciliation efforts. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (SBU) NEW USG DEMINING PROGRAM: A State Department-sponsored initiative to provide humanitarian demining training to the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) has entered its operational phase. The USD 2.2 million program, which is being run by the RONCO Corporation, provides demining training and operational oversight to SLA demining teams. An initial batch of 125 deminers graduated from the training course on September 24 and a second group of 147 is slated to graduate on November 4. A total of 300 SLA troops are slated to be trained by the time the program wraps up in early 2004. The training is taking place at a SLA engineering school located in Embilipitiya town in Hambantota District in the south of the country.

¶4. (SBU) TECHNICAL OVERSIGHT OPERATIONS TO BEGIN: After the training is completed, RONCO will join the teams for on-site humanitarian demining operations in Jaffna and Vavuniya Districts in the north, and Trincomalee District in the east. Technical surveying operations, in preparation for mine clearance, are currently underway in all three of these districts. The teams, operating under the technical oversight of RONCO personnel, will target specific areas for landmine/unexploded ordnance (UXO) removal based on maximum humanitarian impact. Typical sites would include areas of high pedestrian traffic and areas where Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are attempting to return. In addition to hands-on humanitarian demining training, the SLA teams are also trained in performing survey work and how to work with residents of the communities in the affected areas. Rounding out the program, some SLA personnel are given emergency medical training to deal with the possibility of injury during the demining operations.

¶5. (SBU) EXCELLENT COOPERATION WITH SLA: Cooperation between RONCO and the SLA continues to be outstanding. RONCO chief of party Fredrik Palsson told poloff on October 30 that he was extremely pleased both with the level of cooperation he had received from the SLA and with the professionalism of the students. Showing the high level of support that the SLA maintains for the program, Lieutenant General Lionel Balagalle, the Chief of the Defense Staff, is slated to attend the November 4 graduation ceremony (as will poloff who coordinates Embassy demining efforts.)

¶6. (SBU) PRESS COVERAGE HIGHLY POSITIVE: The project continues to garner extremely favorable press coverage. The September 24 graduation of the first tranche of students was covered widely in English-, Sinhala-, and Tamil-language papers. Government and independent radio and television also carried highly favorable coverage of the event.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: Sri Lanka's landmine/UXO problem is a serious one, with UNDP estimating that roughly one million landmines are present along with thousands of tons of UXO in the north/east. Dozens of Sri Lankans are injured every month and some are killed. To counter this problem, the U.S. sent out two Quick Reaction

Demining Force teams to Jaffna in 2002 and 2003 to remove mines and UXO at key sites. These "QRDF" teams had great success. With the RONCO training and technical oversight program, U.S. assistance is now helping to create an indigenous demining capacity that will allow the GSL to continue effective operations after USG involvement ends. Overall, these demining programs are serving to underscore the U.S. government's continued strong support for Sri Lanka's peace and reconciliation efforts. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

ENTWISTLE